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Exploring the Sublime in Art

by Emily Krebaum

(Philosophy 1110)

In the history of philosophy, the first philosopher to write about the sublime was an ancient Greek philosopher of the first century referred to as Longinus. He wrote that the sublime was "an adjective that describes great, elevated, or lofty thought or language, particularly in the context of rhetoric" (Leitch 135-154). Though his focus was on writing, Longinus inspired many future philosophers to develop their own concepts of the sublime. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was one of these philosophers. Though Longinus is only referenced once in Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, some argue that Burke's concept of the sublime is influenced by Longinus' *On the Sublime* because "the relationship between words and passions in Burke" is similar to the role rhetoric has in Longinus' concept of the sublime (Futoshi). Hoshino Futoshi, professor at the University of Tokyo, claims that "Burke's theory on the sublime (is) a critical successor to *On the Sublime* by Pseudo-Longinus" (Futoshi). Although their ideas were similar, Burke and Longinus still had different theories about the sublime. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), a philosopher who came after Burke, also had a different concept of the sublime that parallel's Burke's. To see how these perspectives apply to art, I am going to examine Burke's concept of the sublime and investigate how it may be used to analyze "The Raft of the Medusa" (1818-1819), a famous Romantic painting by Theodore Gericault (1791-1824). I will then compare Burke's perspective to Lyotard's and explain how Lyotard's concept of the sublime can be used to interpret "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" (1950-1951), a famous abstract painting by Barnett Newman (1905-1970).

Burke was born in 1729 and raised in Ireland, Dublin. After graduating from Trinity College, he moved to London and became a member of parliament in 1765. Burke is best known for his opposition to the French Revolution and support for the American Revolution, but his works on the sublime are important as well ("Edmund Burke"). In fact, he was the first philosopher to distinguish the beautiful from the sublime. Before he published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the common belief was that the sublime is something beautiful that creates a pleasurable experience for the viewer. Burke defied this belief and proposed that beauty resulted in pleasure, but the sublime resulted in a mix of pleasure and fear.

To Burke, beauty is something that only brings superficial pleasure. One sees a beautiful painting and admires it, but the viewer's feelings towards the painting do not go beyond admiration and respect. It can be likened to meeting an individual; small talk is made and the encounter goes smoothly, but nothing substantial is gained from the conversation. The main reason that this pleasure is only superficial, according to Burke, is that painful emotions are stronger than enjoyable ones and have more of an impact (Burke 111). He has little evidence to explain why pain has more of an impact than pleasure, but Burke argues that pain can almost always be related to self-preservation. Burke writes, "The passions which concern self-preservation, turn mostly on pain or danger. The ideas of pain, sickness, and death, fill the mind with strong emotions of horror; but life and health, though they put us in a capacity of being affected with pleasure, they make no such impression by the simple enjoyment. The passions therefore which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on pain and danger, and they are the most powerful of all the passions" (110). In other words, pain can be connected to danger, which has the greatest influence because danger forces one to think about their death. Burke considers death the "the king of terrors" and anything that touches upon one's fear of death will go beyond the superficial pleasure that beauty brings (111).

That is why Burke writes, "Indeed terror is...the ruling principle of the sublime" (131). The fear of death is what threatens one's self-preservation and draws the strongest reaction, which explains how the sublime is separate from beauty. Beauty *charms* the viewer, but the sublime *moves* the viewer because it both pleases and terrifies them, leaving a lasting impression that beauty cannot achieve.

It is important to note that this reaction to the sublime consists of both pain and pleasure. Whereas pain is connected to fear, pleasure is connected to awe; the combination of the two feelings make what Burke refers to as *astonishment*. He explains, "...astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror...the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (130). Though there is fear, the pleasure comes from one's mind being completely overwhelmed with the sublime, which creates the feeling of awe. The sublime is beyond the viewer's comprehension, which is why the "object which employs it" cannot be reasoned, even though one might try (130). That is another key difference between beauty and the sublime; beauty does not pose enough of a challenge and sates one's curiosity too easily. The sublime, however, poses a much greater challenge and instead of satisfying one's curiosity, it intensifies it. The viewer feels astonished as a result. Burke also notes that the viewer is able to feel astonished because they are only faced with the threat or *idea* of something terrifying; if they were in the situation themselves, it would only be a painful encounter. Therefore, there is some pleasure gained simply by knowing one is not in immediate danger and is in a position to entertain the prospect of it.

One of the best examples for Burke's definition of the sublime is "The Raft of the Medusa" by French painter Géricault. Even before taking in the scene itself, the colors of the painting are unsettling. Dark, saturated colors fill the canvas, mixed with the sharp tones of pale, sickly flesh. The scene depicted is equally disturbing; a group of men on what looks like a broken raft with a sail and the ocean waves raging in the background, indicating there was a shipwreck. To make matters worse, on the left side there appears to be a huge wave close to slamming into the shipwrecked crew. Death seems inevitable in this piece. In fact, it looks like five of the men are already dead or dying. It does not seem as if the surviving crew are too concerned with them; one man has an arm draped over his comrade and has a troubled, pensive expression on his face. On the right side, there are men hidden in the shadows. One of them is gesturing frantically to the horizon, while the other two are waving what appears to be their shirts. It is hard to understand why until, looking closely, one sees a tiny dot of a ship in the distance.

The question is whether the ship is leaving or approaching. Without knowing what the painting is depicting, it can be either one. Viewers who do not know the context of the painting might interpret it as the ship leaving and the thought of the crew being left to die, in a number of gruesome ways, would likely horrify them. The viewer may contemplate their own death and feel astonished as a result, according to Burke's theory that reactions to the sublime involve both fear and pleasure. Since terror is the ruling principle of the sublime, for Burke, and death is the "king of terrors", it can be argued that death is a concept of the sublime (111). Therefore, "The Raft of the Medusa" can be considered a representation of the sublime, by Burke's standards, if the subject matter and elements of the painting pose the question of death and provoke an astonished reaction from the viewer. The subject matter prompts the viewer to think about death, but the elements of the painting are what make the viewer *fear* death. It is the sheer size of the large canvas that catches one's attention and draws them in, almost forcing the viewer to insert themselves into the piece. It is the dreadful atmosphere created by the dark colors and the pitch black sky overcast with storm clouds that unsettle the viewer, implying that there is little hope for the remaining crew. It is the images of dead bodies strewn about and the survivors piling on top of each other while desperately reaching out towards the Argus that may horrify the viewer, and rightfully so.

However, "The Raft of the Medusa" is based on a real event and knowing the context of the painting provides a different interpretation. The frigate Medusa was lost in July 1816 and found by

the Argus weeks later, which means the ship looming in the horizon is most likely the Argus coming to rescue the shipwrecked crew (Kren). A New York Times book review of *Rocking the Boat* by writer Florence Williams recounts the events before the shipwreck. There were five lifeboats which were boarded by politicians, officers, and the captain. The rest of the crew, soldiers, and settlers were put in a makeshift raft and told that the lifeboats would pull them to safety (Williams). Williams writes, "They were, as Miles puts it, "a grab bag of rough, drunken soldiers and sailors, assorted Cap Vert colonists and several officers who were out of favor."...After just a few minutes at sea, an officer in the governor's lifeboat lowered a hatchet and cut the rope that joined it to the raft" (Williams). Completely abandoned, the raft of 146 men and one woman were left with a few caskets of wine and some biscuits. What came next was "murder, suicide, sickness, famine and cannibalism" and when the Argus finally rescued them, there were only fifteen survivors left (Williams).

Knowing more about the crimes committed by the shipwrecked crew, it is possible that "The Raft of the Medusa" not only confronts the viewer with the fear of death, but makes them question if there is a fate *worse* than death. In the events of the Medusa, the first act of cruelty was abandoning the other crew members because their lives were seen as less valuable than the high-ranked members on the lifeboats. However, the focus of the painting is on the episode of "human depravity, madness, fear and brutality that show what the human species is really capable of" (Williams). The expressions and poses of the men in this piece reveal this depravity. As mentioned before, no one appears to be concerned with the dead or dying. There is just one man who sits near the left and holds a dead man with one arm. Even then, his expression is not one of sorrow, but something indecipherable. The wide eyes staring into nothing and the pinched eyebrows could indicate madness and explain why he is not with the rest of men piled on top of each other. Right behind him in the shadows is a man clutching his head and looking distraught, possibly having gone mad as well. One of the few rational people seems to be a dark-skinned man next to him, looking at the other men with what could be surprise or disgust. Either would be an appropriate reaction. Despite being amongst the corpses of their crew members, most of the men are preoccupied with the Argus in the horizon. Logically, this would be a natural reaction to seeing help arrive, except logic appears to have vanished completely in this scene. *Deranged* would be the best word to describe the men. There are two men at the very top of the pile waving the Argus down, while the others seem to be climbing over each other to get to these two. There is a man who, despite the dead body lying on top of him, is gripping the leg of one of the cloth-waving men. The dark-skinned man at the very top is being grabbed by a man with red cloth covering his head. In the foreground, the other men are reaching for this man with the red cloth on his head, for reasons unknown to the viewer. The truth is, there might not be a reason; the pure desperation and insanity of the shipwrecked crew members has them reaching for the men at the very top. They could be fruitlessly trying to grasp onto their last shreds of hope, represented by the cloth-waving men trying to get them rescued. Or they could be trying to pull down the men above them and get to the top themselves, as if being the first spotted by the Argus will guarantee their salvation. In the men whose faces are visible, their expressions seem to be hopeful; wide eyes with eyebrows drawn up and parted lips. Yet what they hope to achieve is unclear. It could be that the pile of men is symbolic for some kind of moral hierarchy. Towards the bottom of the picture are the dead (many of them naked) and the man who seems to have lost touch with reality. Then, in the center of the foreground, there are men who are frantically reaching for and trying to grab the cloth-waving men. At the top of the pile are the men who, as opposed to the senseless actions of their crew, are trying to flag down the Argus. Their rationality marks them as superior to the irrationality of the other men, hence why they are farthest away from the corpses and at the top of the painting's pyramid composition; this placement indicates they are at the top of the moral hierarchy as well. It is also interesting to note that in the background, there is a group of men who are close to those at the top. Like the men in the foreground, two of them are looking at the cloth-waving men, one with his hands clasped together. Another one has a neutral expression and the man with his arm extended is looking

at them with what seems like remorse. What he is gesturing to is debatable. It could be directed at the Argus or, considering the look on his face, the actions of his crew. Many of the men in this scene do not seem human. They are beyond reason, driven with no sense behind their actions. This is the implication that is most chilling; that when pushed to their limits, humans are capable of terrible things. Once they lose their grip on reality, they lose all sense and, arguably, everything that makes them human. This thought terrifies the viewer, and yet it awes them as well. The idea of what horrors humans are capable of is a fascinating one, especially because it relates to everyone. When confronted with the idea on this gigantic canvas and forced to take in everything, the viewer can be overwhelmed with the concept and feel astonished as a result. Plus, there is the pleasure of being able to speculate about human nature from a position of safety, since the viewer is not experiencing the situation the painting depicts.

According to Burke, this reaction indicates that the painting is a representation of the sublime; it focuses on a different interpretation, but the reaction is the same. Rather than just being an aesthetically pleasing piece, it leaves a lasting impression on the viewer through the terrifying idea of what depravity humans are capable of. "The Raft of the Medusa" is considered a quintessential Romantic painting because like Burke's ideas on the sublime, it breaks away from traditionally beautiful paintings and depicts the harsh, ugly truths of reality. However, later philosophers, such as Lyotard, would disagree with this point. Burke has said himself that he believes visual art cannot properly represent the sublime, which is another reason why Futoshi thought he was influenced by Longinus (Futoshi). Burke writes, "The proper manner of conveying the *affections* of the mind from one to another is by words; there is a great insufficiency in all other methods of communication; and so far is a clearness of imagery from being absolutely necessary to an influence upon the passions...In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever" (134). Though Burke is referring to visual art as a whole, "The Raft of the Medusa" proves his point. The concepts of the painting are concepts of the sublime. The idea of death and the idea of losing one's humanity evoke a combination of fear and awe. This mixed reaction qualifies them as concepts of the sublime, according to Burke's perspective. However, the painting depicts a certain event, which limits exploration of these ideas. Instead of the viewer questioning themselves about death and human depravity as a whole, they place themselves in the specific scenario of being shipwrecked. There are limits placed on the limitless sublime the painting is trying to portray, which, according to Lyotard's perspective, marks the painting as a thing of beauty and not of the sublime. The explicitness and specific depiction of the scene ends up straying away from Lyotard's concept of the sublime, which will be explained further through Lyotard's perspective. First, it will be instructive to examine Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and *Critique of Judgment* to understand Lyotard's philosophy.

In 1764, Immanuel Kant wrote *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and expanded on Burke's philosophy. He agreed that the sublime produces a mixture of fear and awe and explains this by dividing the sublime into two categories; the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime (Rohlf). The mathematically sublime relates to what Burke says about one's mind being completely overwhelmed; the object is too great in magnitude for us to comprehend it. For example, the universe represents the mathematically sublime just because of its sheer size. One cannot measure the universe and though one knows logically it is infinite, it is impossible for a human to actually understand what it means to be infinite. The idea of the universe as a whole is, on some level, terrifying because of this uncertainty. One can only speculate as to what is out there, since it is impossible to know everything that is in the universe. This speculation, however, ties back into what Burke says about the pleasure that comes with fear. Kant describes this as the dynamically sublime; there is pleasure gained from speculation because the viewer is not in immediate danger (Rohlf). Since viewers are in the position to speculate, they gain pleasure by trying to answer questions the object of the sublime poses.

One of the distinctions Kant makes that Burke hints at is that beauty is approached with understanding and imagination, whereas the sublime is approached with understanding and reason. Beauty is found in objects with a form that can be bounded, but the sublime is found in formless objects that cannot be bounded (Kant 98). This distinction between beauty and the sublime is explained further in Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. He expands on Kant's idea of the sublime being formless and claims that the sublime cannot be found in nature, yet beauty can. In fact, nature and the sublime clash to create a tension that, in Lyotard's perspective, must be kept unresolved. Lyotard writes, "What awakens the "intellectual feeling", the sublime, is not nature, which is an artist in forms and the work of forms, but rather magnitude, force, quantity in its purest state, a "presence" that exceeds what imaginative thought can grasp at once in a form -- what it can *form*" (Lyotard 53). In other words, nature cannot represent the sublime because nature is all about forms. To quote philosopher G.W.F Hegel, nature "exhibits no freedom in its existence, but only necessity and contingency" ("Hegel's Philosophy"). To summarize this theory, I would use a 'box' as an example. Nature can be thought of as fitting into this 'box'. A rock, a river, or a mountain can be defined, described, and understood; it fits within the 'box' of reason, which is why it is necessary for imagination to engage the object and make it more interesting. The sublime, however, is too enormous to fit into the 'box' of reason. Infinity, the meaning of life, and life after death cannot be defined, described, or understood because no one knows exactly what they are or what they are like. It cannot fit into the box of reason, which is why one's reason *tries* to engage the object and understand it, even if it is not possible. Imagination cannot engage if reasoning cannot grasp the object first, which is why both Kant and Lyotard claim that beauty involves imagination and the sublime involves reason. Beauty is found in nature and nature can be put in the 'box' of reason, which is what Kant means by an object being bounded. The sublime is outside the 'box' and though we try to put it inside one, it is impossible, hence why the sublime is unbounded.

The attempt to apply reason to a formless object seems pointless, but Lyotard argues that it is necessary. He writes, "The faculties play with each other but are not guided by the concept of an end that would be the aim of their play: this explains the persistence of aesthetic pleasure" (64). There are two important parts to this argument, the first being that when understanding and reason engage the sublime, they are "not guided by the concept of an end" (64). Although humans try to place limits on the sublime, in an attempt to comprehend it, placing those limits does not necessarily mean finding an answer. It is impossible to answer the question of the sublime, which is why one takes pleasure in just contemplating or dwelling on concepts of the sublime. Just as there is pleasure in being in a position of safety to contemplate, there is pleasure in having one's understanding and reasoning challenged.

Considering that the sublime must remain unanswerable, it makes sense as to why Lyotard argues the sublime cannot be presented or must be as far away from presentation as possible. He explains, "In sublime feeling the tension works in the opposite direction. The concept places itself out of the reach of all presentation...All of its forms are inane before the absolute" (76). Since the sublime cannot be bounded within the 'box' of reason, it cannot be truly presented either, through visual, auditory, or any other sort of the presentation. However, one can try to present the sublime, and this is where Burke and Lyotard's perspectives disagree. "The Raft of the Medusa" would not be an example of the sublime for Lyotard. As a Romantic painting, its aim is to essentially portray 'the truth', thus resolving the tension between the human faculties and the sublime. What this 'truth' is depends on the subject matter, but "the defining feature of Romanticism is the belief in the mind's active perception of truth and reality which is, in effect, the process of the creative imagination...the artist or poet does not **imitate** or **passively reflect** reality... The romantic poet **expresses** the vision of his mind which sheds light upon the world" ("The Romantic Context"). Gericault was a Romantic painter himself and "The Raft of the Medusa" is considered a Romantic painting not just because of art style, but because of its political message. Gericault meant to expose the actions of the French

nobles and paint sympathy for the shipwrecked crew ("The Raft of the Medusa"). In this way, his painting 'sheds light upon the world' because it marks the French nobles' actions as wrong; this bias, in Lyotard's perspective, keeps the painting from accurately presenting the sublime. I would argue that avant-garde art comes closer to capturing Lyotard's concept of the sublime. One such work, Barnett Newman's "Vir Heroicus Sublimis", would be an effective example.

Newman was an American painter who played a significant role in the abstract expressionist movement. Started in 1950, the painting took about a year to complete and was made with oil paints. A bright red covers the entire canvas, which is roughly seven feet wide and seventeen feet tall ("Barnett Newman: Vir"). On the canvas are five vertical lines that extend top to bottom. The first line on the left is a dim shade of orange and appears to be thinner than the others. The next line, just a short way from the first one, is a bold white line that seems as thick as the black line placed farther away from it. An orange line identical to the first one is next to the black line, though the distance is smaller than the one between its twin and the white line. The last line is a dim shade of white that just barely touches the edge of the canvas and is a short distance away from the orange line. Interesting to note is the title of the piece, "Vir Heroicus Sublimis", which roughly translates to "Man, heroic and sublime". The title prompts more questions about the work and its meaning ("Barnett Newman: Vir"). Punctuation is crucial here because instead of "man, heroic, sublime," listed as three separate things, it is "Man, heroic and sublime". Man, as in the human race, is being described as heroic and sublime. Newman has said before that the viewer's interaction with this piece is similar to meeting a new person. He explains, "It's no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there's a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives" ("Barnett Newman: Vir"). Taking his statement into consideration, one can assume that the artwork, as the title states, is about people as a whole. But why, as the title suggests, are people heroic and sublime? Is this an honest belief, or is it satire?

To answer these questions, it is important to know that Newman's painting refers to his essay "The Sublime is Now". In his essay, Newman mentions Longinus, the first philosopher to write about the sublime, and argues that Longinus confused beauty for the sublime. He claims that the belief that beauty is the same as the sublime is most apparent in Greek art and Renaissance art, which reflects Greek ideals¹. Like Burke and Kant, Newman believes beauty and the sublime are different. Yet in his essay, Newman questions, "...if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?" (Newman 581). Newman explains that though modern art has been moving away from Renaissance art, it still has not accomplished portraying the sublime because modern art is simply distorting or denying Renaissance ideals. This can be seen in the Cubist movement, where "artists abandoned perspective, which had been used to depict space in the Renaissance, and they also turned away from the realistic modeling of figures" ("Cubism"). Cubists take Renaissance ideals, like perspective, and distort them to create something different. Yet Newman argues that when making modern art "we are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you...we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings" (Newman 582). In other words, in order to represent the sublime, artists should strive to create entirely original works that do not derive from what has already been done. This is important to note because it explains why Newman's painting is so abstract; in an effort to be original, Newman forsakes all concrete visuals for something more metaphorical and instinctual. Instead of the emotions we see on the faces of the

¹ In Ancient Greece, one of the main objectives of art was to portray what the Greeks found beautiful, specifically beauty in the human form. Greek artists would avoid anything they considered ugly and often depicted what they thought to be 'perfect' human beings to represent their deities (Koontz).

men in "The Raft of the Medusa", the colors of "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" do not portray any specific emotion, but they evoke a certain response. The jarring red of the canvas makes us feel disturbed or unsettled. Red, in its brighter forms, is often used as a warning, a way of making it clear that there is some kind of danger ("Color Theory"). But what is the red warning us of?

When Newman commented on his piece, he said that "he wanted to convey his feelings about the tragic human condition" (Kleiner 975). This is where the red of the canvas connects with the two white and black lines in the center. Going off of Newman's statement about conveying the tragic human condition, I would argue that the painting itself is meant to be about humanity and the struggle to do the right thing. The white and black lines are, for lack of better terms, the good and evil clashing inside of us. We try to be good people, but the jarring red of the canvas reminds us of the unpleasant reality; we cannot always be good. In fact, it is debatable whether we are truly good at all, try as we might. The Greeks were quite aware of this unpleasant reality. One example of the struggle to be a good person is Oedipus, a tragic hero from Greek literature. Oedipus tries to do the right thing by defying the prophecy that predicts he will kill the king and marry his widowed wife. By trying to defy his fate, Oedipus ends up fulfilling it and, as punishment, he blinds himself. This physical act of blinding himself is fitting because, metaphorically, Oedipus was always blind. As humans, we can be ignorant to our flaws and the consequences of our actions. Even when we think we understand, we cannot predict the future and even if we could, our mistakes would still prevent us from doing what is just. Though Oedipus knew the prophecy, his arrogance and pride made him believe that he could defy it and, in trying to do so, he makes it come true. It can be argued that the same message is present in Newman's piece, which brings the title into question again. Are humans truly heroic and sublime? Perhaps they try to be heroic, and perhaps it is this struggle, this tension between right and wrong, that reflects the sublime. All too often do people, in their ignorance and pride, expect themselves to be good when in reality, that is not always true. It is this revelation that shocks and scares us, similar to how the elements of the painting surprises us. The vastness of the canvas opens up the fear of what is within humanity, some tragic flaw or sin that interferes with our best intentions. Just like how this painting takes the viewer by surprise, we are taken by surprise when (or if) we realize that no matter how hard we try, we are not truly good people.

The truth is, there is no one perfect theory for this piece, and that is exactly how it is meant to be. Lyotard's vision of the sublime is unresolved tension. The viewer is captured immediately by the piece, both by its massive size, its choice of colors, and the obscurity of it. They might dismiss the piece as too obscure, but others will find it thought provoking and challenging because, like the sublime, this painting has no final answers. One may try to search for one, but all they come back with is more questions. Even if someone asked the artist what the piece was about, the concepts of the painting -- concerning the human condition and the struggle to do the right thing -- cannot be defined or completely understood. The painting exemplifies what Lyotard refers to as a "deaf desire for limitlessness" (Lyotard 55). One becomes frustrated trying to apply reason to these concepts, finding out they cannot do so. Yet at the same time, the frustration is exciting as it challenges the human faculties and entices one's curiosity.

"The Raft of the Medusa" attempts to approach similar concepts of the sublime, yet instead of depicting the struggle to do the right thing, it can depict the fear of death or what happens when people are pushed to their limits. The key difference between the two paintings, from Lyotard's perspective, is *presentation*. "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" may be held within the bounds of a visual medium, but it is completely vague and open to interpretation. Instead of providing a scenario, the painting lets the viewer explore for themselves and is rewarding for those who bother to search for deeper meaning. The only limits placed are not created by the concepts themselves, such as the tragic human condition, but by the viewer when they try to pinpoint what these concepts are and how they apply to the painting. Again, it is natural and necessary for one to apply reason, but whereas one can apply reason to the idea of a shipwreck, it is much more challenging to do so with an enormous red

painting that depicts nothing specific. That is why Lyotard's concept of the sublime can be best applied to Newman's painting. It engages the viewer's reasoning and does not seek to answer any 'truths', unlike Gericault's Romantic painting.

To summarize, Burke, Kant, and Lyotard all share similar thoughts on the sublime and seem to build off one another. For Burke, the sublime is founded on terror, yet draws forth pleasure as well to create astonishment. Burke's concept of the sublime can be defined by the viewer's emotional reaction, which is why "The Raft of the Medusa" is an effective example. The concepts of death and human depravity combined with elements of the painting can provoke the feeling of astonishment Burke describes. Kant's philosophy then expands on Burke's and claims that beauty engages understanding and imagination, whereas the sublime engages understanding and reason. Lyotard's perspective takes this a step further and claims that it is impossible for one's reasoning to comprehend the sublime because the sublime is formless. Nonetheless, it is necessary for one's reason to try to engage the sublime. The sublime will always remain unbounded, which is why the sublime, to Lyotard, must be as far away from presentation as possible. This makes "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" an effective example for Lyotard's perspective because of how abstract the painting is. There is no specific scenario depicted, so the viewer's mind is free to explore; one's reasoning is challenged to make sense of the concepts and elements of the painting. Essentially, there is no answer as to which painting is a better representation of the sublime because everyone's perception of the sublime is different. However, by applying Burke and Lyotard's philosophies on the sublime to these paintings, we not only find out more about the philosophers' theories, but about the paintings themselves. It allows us to view them from a new perspective which is, I would argue, one of finest aspects to art and philosophy; with new information, our perceptions are always changing.

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